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ABSTRACT

An examination of the scholarly convention as an information system reveals two problems: the word orientation of the usual convention format, excluding other communication variables; and the extent to which suggestions, complaints, or comments are isolated from an overall system orientation. Information gathering on conventions has centered on vital statistics about attendance and papers or on interviews with those attending about their perceptions. Conventions tend to serve in three capacities: as recruiter for the association and its programs, as a "bazaar," or marketplace, for the exchange of ideas, and as an educational experience. The "nonverbal" variables of the convention experience, particularly in the communications field, are worthy of further study. (RN)

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"NONVERBAL VARIABLES IN THE CONVENTION INFORMATION SYSTEM"

or

"AN INQUIRY INTO SOME BROADER PERSPECTIVES"

or

"CAN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH HELP?"

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PROLOGUE

The succeeding titles on the preceeding page reflect a progression of thought as we wrestled with the concept of the scholarly convention as an information system. Our interest in this session was initially stimulated by two observations: (a) conventions of communication associations are a bit like shoemakers' children; we advise others how to communicate, but we frequently don't apply what we know to our own problems; and (b) some associations (and ICA may be a particularly good example) tend to be oscillating systems; attempts to solve some problems lead to others, and the attempts to solve those re-introduce the original problem, often in a new and magnified form; particularly in a young organization, membership and leadership changes rapidly enough so that decision-making often occurs with little awareness of the whys (or why-nots) of decisions made, say, five years earlier. We had hoped that a session such as this might (a) focus constructive attention on the problem, (b) record for future posterity some of the alternatives that have been tried (or suggested), and (c) lead to some productive discussion -- and perhaps even research -- which would pave the way to more effective conventions in the future.

In our initial thinking on the problem we were struck with two problems: (a) the word-orientation of the traditional convention format to the exclusion of other potentially important communication variables; and (b) the extent to which the usual suggestions, comments, complaints, etc., lacked a larger systems orientation; the "problem" of the convention is often tackled piecemeal with little awareness of the ramifications of

proposed changes -- or the pitfalls of resistance to change.

As we began exploring this larger framework, we found our own thinking shift from the question, "What can the association, through its convention, do for its members?" to a more profound question: "What can the members, through their association, do for the world?"

* * *

"In comparison with attention given to formal print media such as books and journals, the role of conventions in the information system of science has been studied very little."

- Paisely & Parker, 1967, p. 1.

* * *

The scholarly convention is, by tradition, word-oriented. The core of the typical convention is the scholar standing up and reading a prepared paper in front of his assembled peers. While this traditional scholar-paper-audience model has much to recommend it, there are additional variables which can influence the effectiveness and efficiency of the convention.

Perhaps we might start by briefly examining just why the paper-presenting model is so robust. (The astute observer will note that the present authors, while examining alternatives, are resorting to paper-reading). At first the paper sessions may seem a bit antiquated, in terms of what we know about modern communication technology. And at times, they certainly seem rather inefficient. We all know, for example, that most people can read faster than they can be read to.

But some people like to take a break from all their reading and listen awhile. They like to see the ugly author who is propounding these new ideas or findings. And, of course, the paper-reader himself garners great gratification from the system. Instead of talking to lowly students, he has the opportunity to address an assembled body of his discerning peers who actually seem to be listening to what he says.

Looking beyond the immediate goals of reader and listener, we find that the paper may fulfill some less obvious needs. For example, the economics of convention-going often militate toward the production of a paper; if you're giving a paper, you may get some travel funds, whereas otherwise you don't. In looking at the larger system, we also note that the paper format may insure a modicum of quality in the convention proceedings. The author is forced to do a bit of homework -- rather than depend on his usual off-the-cuff profundity. This, in turn, allows for some screening and sorting and grouping so the convention-goer can use his time more efficiently, and perhaps make a somewhat more informed choice in deciding whether to attend a particular session -- or go to the bar.

Which brings us to some of the other gratifications of convention-going. While this may surprise you who are attending your first convention, research indicates that there are other reasons for attending a conference besides reading a paper or being read to. Some of these motivations, sadly, relate to man's more primitive needs, the simple desires for gluttony and other pleasures of the flesh too numerous to mention here. (Perhaps we should avoid being chauvinistic and speak of the primitive needs of man and woman; but probably it's just as well that we don't get too specific. We'll leave that matter to your imagination -- and your own after-hours research).

Quite seriously, of course, the convention is a unique gathering of an otherwise invisible college. For many scholars, important intellectual matters are transacted, and this exchange frequently takes place

through informal rather than formal channels. Researchers exchange information on plans and progress. They learn about funding trends. Collaborators have a chance to compare notes. Authors and editors get together. Teachers learn about new developments and new teaching materials. Students and faculty are recruited. Old friends have a chance to meet and nourish otherwise isolated intellectual interests. In all, convention-going can be an exhausting exercise. (It has, in fact, been suggested that a moritorium on conventions would considerably extend the longevity of our scientific community; but it might also take a terrible toll in productivity and satisfaction).

While most of us recognize the multi-functional aspects of conventions, it is frequently the paper sessions which elicit the strongest criticism. The sessions do seem inefficient to many. And as the most obvious, manifest aspect of a conference, the paper sessions serve as a lightening rod for a wide variety of expressed dissatisfactions. In particular, the paper sessions are likely to be criticized on the basis of quality, the grouping of papers, the time allowed or not allowed, the competition of attractive sessions, or the dearth of anything that appeals, the opportunity or lack of opportunity to critique, discuss and probe, not enough sessions or too many sessions, the location of sessions within the total convention frame, etc.

We would like to comment on some of the nonverbal variables in the convention system. But first, let us put the problems of ICA in the context of research on other scientific conventions and the problems of the communication discipline more generally.

RESEARCH

As Paisley (1965) points out, data gathering on conventions has taken two major tacks: (a) the vital statistics of conventioning have been summarized, e.g., the trends in attendence, number of papers given, etc., or (b) individual convention-goers have been interviewed concerning their perceptions.

As an example of the first, Garvey and Griffith (1963) studied the APA national conventions of 1936, 1951, 1957, and 1961. Over that quarter of a century, they noted: (a) a ten-fold increase in the number of events scheduled; (b) an increase in the number of graduate student participants; (c) a shift toward brief research reports from younger scholars and symposia presented by older scientists; and (d) a trend from almost total acceptance of papers meeting minimal quality standards in 1936 to a fairly high rejection rate of papers in recent years (although different divisions differed sharply in their rejection rates). ICA, as a younger organization, may well be experiencing some of these same trends.

As an example of the interview approach, Paisley and Parker (1967) did an intensive study of the 1966 meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Some of their results were strikingly similar to the earlier interview findings of Garvey and Griffith. For example, participants tended to see, as most valuable, information about new findings and methodologies. On the average, theory and concepts were mentioned only half as often. In both associations, informal conversations and discussions were recalled as an important source of valuable information. And they noted that many participants come to conventions seeking

specific scientific information (over 50% in APA and 21% in AAPOR). By the same token, the psychologists appeared more successful in getting the information they were seeking, and Paisley and Parker conclude: "Until a better explanation is suggested, we might conclude that being 'partly successful' in obtaining information is par for the interdisciplinary research areas that AAPOR members represent." (1967, p. 40)

This last comment leads us to a much more difficult question: just how easy is it for a communication scholar to get the information he wants and desires even in an optimimally designed convention setting? In other words, what is a reasonable level of expectation to lay on the convention system? This, in turn, leads to some broad-ranging questions about the present state of communication as a scientific discipline.

FUNCTIONS OF THE CONVENTION

In attempting to design more effective alternatives to our present convention format, we need to explore some of the functions the annual meeting serves, for the membership, for the participants, and for the larger systems: the association, the discipline, the academic community generally, and the broader society. For the association, the annual convention may be a vital manifestation, perhaps the key event of the year, the prime index of the organization's health, scope, and direction. It is a time when the leadership and members have their most intense interaction, on the board of directors, in the division business meetings, and in the association's annual business meeting. It's the point at which key decisions are made which affect the future vigor and vitality of the association. It is the time when the membership (and perhaps the pros-

pective membership) has the clearest look at its association: its caliber, its breadth, its performance.

In making its convention "statement to the world," the association has a number of options, beginning with such simple messages as time and place. Meeting in our present location (Montreal), for example, we are particularly aware of our international scope. A thrust which was begun in Cleveland in 1969, when the association first considered changing its name from the National Society for the Study of Communication, has now been translated into action. Similarly, the association made a "statement" about itself and its aspirations when it shifted, in 1968, from a summer convention on college campuses, to a spring meeting in major metropolitan centers. In making moves such as this, and in moving from one part of the continent to another, the association is using the convention as "a recruiter."

The Convention As Recruiter. It is frequently assumed that a system, such as a professional association, should grow, and that the annual convention may be an excellent means of attracting new members. (Certainly, if the membership is dwindling, this would cause concern for the leadership). There is, however, a real question about the rate and type of growth which is most desirable. Some, for example, feel that an association such as ICA should be a small, elite organization with a sharp focus. Others argue for a broad-based membership, drawing in an eclectic assortment of communication interests. Over the years, ICA has attempted to appeal to a wide range of scholars and professionals interested in communication. There has been an attempt to provide something in the conven-

tion for the researcher, the teacher and the practitioner. At the same time, there have been definite swings within the overall pattern; at various times, for example, more attention has been given to the communication consultant dimension or to the interests of the researcher.

If growth is a prime goal, then perhaps a simple strategy is to manipulate the reward/effort ratio for potential participants, making it as easy as possible to get as much as possible. As suggested earlier, this has been taken into account in selecting convention cities, both in location and appeal, and in selecting convention times. Similarly, one would expect that the easier it is to get on the program, the more people will attend. The counter proposition is that the lower the quality of the program, the more people will be disenchanted.

These competing forces in the design of an effective system are, of course, not uncommon. As Alexander (1964) has suggested, the designer has the challenge of finding the best possible form to match the constraints of the context. Alexander also recommends tackling this by the systematic elimination of "negative fits," and by designing the system so that subsystems can be adjusted without wrecking the whole system.

While there are many amenities which can make a convention more enjoyable, we will focus on the intellectual rewards. Is it possible, for example, to make the convention a richer information experience while maintaining or lowering the cost? Or, for that matter, are there small increments of effort which would net substantially increased intellectual payoffs? These questions, in turn, suggest two models for the convention: the conference as bazar (that's b-a-z-a-r, not b-i-z-a-r-r-e) or the con-

ference as educator.

The Conference As Bazar. The first analogy suggests that convention-planners arrange a convenient market place where fruitful intellectual exchange can take place. We need, in short, places where those who have information can offer their goods and where those who are seeking information can find it. The role of the managers then is to encourage as many producers and consumers as possible to meet at the prescribed place. There may be some screening for quality offerings, but the bazar manager does not attempt to exercise the same kind of quality control that, for example, a major department store might try to exercise over its various departments. At best, the manager sets up the ground rules, makes time and place available, and maybe does a little organizing so that similar wares are (or are not) in the same locale. In this approach, the relative satisfaction of the participants is likely to depend largely on who else shows up.

The Conference As Educator. A more aggressive approach is to assume that the convention-planners should organize a high-reward information experience. This may show up in the caliber of the convention speakers, the quality control exercised on panels and papers, the organization of major unifying themes. The success of this more directive approach, of course, depends on how well the organizers can gauge and meet the interests of the participants. In practice, the typical convention has aspects of both bazar and a more structured wholesaling of knowledge. In both cases, the relative success of a given conference may also relate to the general state of the larger discipline. In short, how

does the face-to-face availability of information compare with the availability of information generally?

THE ASSOCIATION AND THE DISCIPLINE

One problem for a young association such as ICA is that the discipline it seeks to serve is also young, ill-defined, and fast-changing. Even when communication is a more mature discipline, however, it may provide some different problems than other behavioral sciences such as psychology, sociology and anthropology. A number of authors have made the rather obvious observation that these other disciplines are organized along increasingly broader levels while communication looks at a particular phenomena, cutting across these levels (Harrison, 1967; Schramm, 1967; Paisley, 1972).

Schramm, in fact, saw this as a difference between a discipline and a field. He argued that communication was the latter, a field which drew on the more primary disciplines. Paisley, meanwhile, construes this difference as two types of discipline, one focusing on levels, the other pursuing a central variable. Economics and political science would be, like communication, organized around focal variables.

Schramm saw communication as a crossroads where "many travelers pass but only a few tarry." He (and others) noted that the early explorers in communication, such as Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Lewin, and Merton, worked the area for awhile and then returned to their original disciplines, political science, sociology, and psychology. The following wave, including people like Hovland, came to communication from other disciplines,

but while they made communication their life work their allegiance was to another partent discipline. Finally, of course, we have a growing generation of scholars who were trained in this new area.

Schramm (1967) did not view this later development with much joy:

> Some of the younger scholars in the field think of communication research as a growing discipline, still primitive in its theory, but likely in the future to have its own learned society, its own body of theory, and recognition as an honorable entity by universitites. As one of the older scholars in the field, I tend to view it as a field, concentrating on a set of problems and drawing on all behavioral theory and method -- rather than as a discipline.

He goes on to project:

> If we can assume that communication research is a nascent discipline, then we can expect that many universities will ultimately create departments concerned with the advanced study of human communication; these will spread into the colleges and junior colleges, even perhaps the secondary schools; there will be an outcropping of doctoral programs in the field, and a flood of texts and research publications; and with an aggressive new discipline seeking its place on the campus, and ambitious young scholars seeking to rise in that discipline, there will be pressure for new courses and no shortage of teachers to give them. The prospect is not entirely an attractive one.

We would argue that what Schramm saw as a unique instance in the study of human communication may well be a recurring pattern in the growth of scientific disciplines. George Basalla (1967), for example, proposes a three-stage model of the spread of Western science across international borders which has some startling similarities to the sketch Schramm provides. Basalla argues that three overlapping phases can be discerned: (a) a "nonscientific stage" when any research done in an area is done by explorers from outside; (b) a "colonial period" when indigenous scientists emerge, but allegiance is still paid to outsiders; and (c) an "independent

stage" when a unique scientific tradition or culture emerges.

Basalla notes that this third stage is the least understood. But some of the hallmarks are clear. The young scientists are trained "at home." Their internal communication networks become more important than their external networks. And this is facilitated by their scientific journals and organizations. He comments that "colonial science has passed its peak" when the scientists "begin a deliberate campaign to strengthen institutions at home and end their reliance upon the external scientific culture."

Basalla makes some other observations which are provocative, for example:

> The easy success of colonial science does not adequately prepare a country for the arduous task of creating and supporting native scientific institutions and fostering attitudes conducive to the rapid growth of science. Scientists working in phase three, and historians who later attempt to plot the development of science during phases two and three, often misunderstand the era of colonial science. In both cases, they tend to praise the high level of scientific activity reached in the colonial era and forget that the level of attainment was made possible through a reliance upon an older, established tradition. (p. 617)

It is perhaps not surprising then to find analogies, such as Berelson's 1959 pronouncement that, "as for communication research, the state is withering away." He lamented the loss of Hovland, Lazarsfeld, Lewin and Lasswell, and he saw only bumbling attempts to move the field forward.

If we accept Paisley's assertion that communication is an emerging scientific discipline, and if we accept the analogy of Basalla's stages of scientific growth, then, of course, the association -- and its convention -- has a very crucial role to play. And in playing that role, it may be particularly important to be aware of the unique problems of the communication discipline.

THE INFORMATION PROBLEM IN COMMUNICATION

Paisley (1972) notes that all science suffers an information problem. The sheer growing size of the information base creates a central concern. In addition, however, younger sciences are likely to suffer from mediocrity. The information hay stack gets bigger and bigger, and our search for the needle -- the findings with a real point -- gets harder and harder.

At the same time, young disciplines suffer from a dramatic scattering of information. Paisley sees this as a feature of variable-focus fields. We tend to see it also as a feature of Basalla's stage two; communication scholars still find it more prestigecus to publish in, say, a psychology journal than in a communication journal.

The research evidence provides striking support for what many of us feel. Parker, Paisley, and Garrett (1967) made a fifteen year study of communication journals, from 1950 to 1965. During that period, the number of relevant journals increased from eight to 17. Meanwhile, a systematic sampling of citations revealed that the journal authors were drawing on 714 different journal titles. In short, any young communication scholar who really wanted to be abreast of his field would have to monitor over seven hundred different journals.

Given this dispersion in the journal literature, it is perhaps not surprising that the convention-goes feels some unease about the organization -- or disorganization -- of his convention fare. Pursuing his distinction between level-orientation and variable-orientation, Paisley (1972) has some interesting speculations about association organization:

> When we look at the internal organization of a few associations in level-fields and variable-fields, an interesting pattern emerges. In level-fields, divisions follow variables of interest. In variable-fields, divisions follow levels. (p. 49)

This was certainly the plan in ICA when the new constitution was adopted. Division I, for example, was to cover intrapersonal communication, including psycholinguistics, etc. Interestingly, Paisley notes that other divisions do emerge. And in ICA, the most recent applications for division status are political communication, educational communication, and theraputic communication, slicing along variables rather than across a level.

CAN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH HELP?

This recent trend also reflects a desire for relevance, an urge to apply communication research to real world problems. This, in turn, partakes in a broader demand, inside and outside of science, for a re-orientation of priorities, for a focusing of energy on research problems with social as well as scientific significance.

In part, the modern scientist has a greater challenge than his pre-war predecessor. At that time, most scientists argued knowledge for knowledge's sake. The image of human knowledge was of some huge temple of wisdom which would slowly be built. Each scientist worked on his little brick, and he didn't worry too much about how or when it would be used. The assumption was that it would eventually fit into the grand scheme.

But increasingly, scientists have begun to view knowledge as a protean form, constantly changing and evolving. In that view, some bits of information are more valuable than others. And some knowledge has startling implications for man. The scientist, in turn, has increased awareness of

the extent to which he controls what knowledge will be produced when. He is increasingly self-conscious of the paradigms he uses. In short, the modern view of knowledge lays on the scientist some awesome responsibilities.

In a little noted article, John Platt (1969) argues that man is facing several severe crises during the next decade and that we should mobilize scientists just as we did in wartime. Platt suggests that the rapid changes of the last 25 years place us in a very precarious position; he sees the rate of technological change leveling off and a very bright future indeed -- if we can survive the next ten years.

Of particular interest is Platt's "crisis intensity chart." He scales the crises facing man in terms of their magnitude, i.e., the number of people who would be affected and the severity of the effect. Heading his list, of course, is the possibility of total annihilation through nuclear escalation or radiological-chemical-biological warefare. His chart then scales on down, all the way to the "non-crisis" problems which he thought were being "overstudied," e.g., man in space.

High on his list are a number of communication related problems: administrative management, the need for participation, group and race conflict, rising expectations, loss of old cultures, communications gap, communication integration, etc. Even the non-communication problems, such as famine, poverty, and pollution, have, of course, a communication dimension if they are to be articulated and solved.

Finally, Platt observes:

> The thing that discourages many scientists -- even social scientists -- from thinking in these research-and-development terms

> is their failure to realize that there are such things as social inventions and that they can have large-scale effects in a surprisingly short time. (p. 451)

He goes on to detail the impact of such innovations as Keynesian economics, opinion polling, operations analysis, information theory and feedback theory, game theory, etc. He adds: "This list is particularly interesting because it shows how much can be done outside official government agencies by inventive men putting their brains together." Most of the achievements he cites were the work of two or more men, working in intellectual centers rather than in political centers.

It is, of course, an interesting exercise to examine our own conventions as a communication problem. It gets even more interesting when we begin to cast it in the problems of the larger, emerging communication discipline. But perhaps if we are as mature a discipline as we think we are, then it would be really interesting to tackle some of the problems on Platt's crisis agenda.

* * *

EPILOGUE

Given the preceeding analysis, are there some creative implications for more effective communication conventions?

We began our thinking on this problem by listing a set of nonverbal variables which we thought might increase the rewards and decrease the costs for the individual, convention-goer. Most of these items, however, were rather obvious when you stopped to think of them. Further, their manipulation lay in the hands of a few, the board of directors, the local arrangements committees, etc. They were not of much intellectual moment for the general membership.

Meanwhile, our preliminary analysis of the information problems of an emerging discipline seems like a meaty intellectual concern, particularly for members of Division I. This topic appears to be worth further analysis, discussion and research.

Finally, we are intrigued with the extent to which the convention can go beyond being a recruiter, a bazar, an educator, and become a problem-solver. To do this would seem to take a more long-range perspective than is usually adopted. And it would require us to broaden our view of the convention, using our know-how to extend the meeting of minds across time and space.

Wouldn't it be interesting, for instance, to have a telephone hook-up right now to discuss some of the things we're talking about with a Schramm or a Paisley or a Basalla? Wouldn't it be interesting to have a videotape interview with Schramm on his current views of the communication field and/or discipline? Isn't it too bad that we don't have tapes of

Lasswell, Hovland and Lazarsfled, talking about their work, sharing with us their perspectives?

Looking to the future, wouldn't it be interesting to have a video-tape interview with a man like John Platt? And then, how about showing that tape to some scientists who are working on some of the priority issues? Then, let them make tapes, laying out their views. Then, maybe have some tapes made by our more respected communication scholars, having them respond to the question: Given that problem, can communication research help? And then, maybe we could share all of those tapes with convention participants, as a catalyst for a rousing intellectual exchange.

Maybe, in fact, we could learn a communication lesson from John Kennedy. Perhaps, at some future convention, we should be exploring the proposition: Ask not what your association can do for you; ask what you can do for mankind.

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